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ABSTRACT

The grammatical analysis and imitation of interesting sentences and paragraphs contained in literary works is a stimulating means of fusing the studies of language, literature, and composition. Students involved in such a course of study acquire an increased awareness of language which, in turn, results in a heightened appreciation of literature and the integration of the information learned into students' daily writing. (DD)

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EXPERIMENT AND DIRECTION IN ENGLISH

Elisabeth M. Phillips

Language, literature, composition—in reality, one; in the average classroom, three separate studies. And because of the separateness, language becomes tedium, composition, drudgery; and literature is continually rushed to the rescue. What a world of difference when fusion takes place!

Recently one of my twelfth-grade girls urged me to read Thurber's *The Thirteen Clocks*, a story I enjoyed so much that I stole time meant for class preparation to finish, and, at the last moment, took from it, quite at random, a sentence for the class to analyze. To my amazement, the discussion that took place was so animated that it was going on after the period was over, and I actually had to put the students out of the room—still arguing. But that's not all. A week or so later the Thurber enthusiast followed up with a recording of the same work, and when Lauren Bacall, who made the record, came to The Sentence, my students looked as if a long-awaited and dearly-loved friend had just walked, quite unexpectedly, into the room. Oh joy! Here was a sentence, the structure of which they had struggled with, now actually being used in, of all places, a very lively and most entertaining story.

This kind of pleasure in a study of sentence structure is hardly usual. The study of language, as most teachers lament, is dull. The average grammar-book sentence goes something like this: "Father objected when he heard our plans." Or "George is an excellent swimmer; nevertheless he is no match for Richard." Or again, "His sailboat was neither new nor handsome, but it was trim and it won every race." Nothing here to grab the student of today—or any day. Little of any value is learned, less retained, and the whole process seems to be taking place in some kind of limbo. In short, we find ourselves teaching a dead, and deadly, grammar when we could be teaching a live one.

How different the sentence that engrossed my class that day:

> Xingu, as he so rashly called himself, was the youngest son of a most powerful king, but he had grown weary of rich attire and banquets and tournaments and the available princesses of his own realm and yearned to find in a far land the maiden of his dreams, singing as he went, learning the life of the lowly, and possibly slaying a dragon here and there.[1]

And the diagram the class came up with, at least tentatively, was this:

[1] Copr. © 1950, James Thurber. From The Thirteen Clocks, published by Simon and Schuster.

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I really don't know what species of grammar this is—if it's any species at all. The class and I worked it out together. They contributed some, I contributed some, and we went into a little more detail than is indicated here; but the important thing is that we explored. We did not, at any rate, worry about final answers, unanimous agreement, or, in fact, any of the usual certitudes. The elements entered slantwise we called "inserts," but there was some disagreement as to whether *in a far land* is a real "insert"—and they were still arguing, as I said, about the last group of participles as they left.

This sentence, I admit, I would never have dared to tackle, nor would I have known what to do with it, if I had not, over the past few years, done considerable studying of the new English grammars and the contributions of the linguists to the teaching of English. Nor would I have been so aware of the intriguing problems embodied in another sentence, gleaned from the *New York Times Magazine,* which I gave to an eleventh grade class, asking them to name the main verb.

"Computers often come up with some startling answers—much like little children who have made a discovery and are trying to communicate it to others."

After the first perfunctory answers, *come, come up,* that class suddenly came to life. I was filling in for another teacher so these were not my own students; but now I had them. They were involved, very much involved—*and* with a problem in grammar. Once you have this kind of interest, you can go just about anywhere. In fact, it's hard to say where it will all lead.

In this case my question led to our changing the verb to the passive voice in order to see what would happen to *up* and *with,* but even before we did that, the girls were giving me synonyms for the verb-idea, and those synonyms were not for *come* or *come up.* We also experimented with the phrase following the dash, placing it in as many different positions as possible, evaluating its effectiveness in each, and when we finished, I think the

* Diagram fundamentally based on the Sector Analysis of Robert L. Allen of Teachers College, Columbia, with whom the author has studied.

students had more knowledge of and more freedom with the English sentence than they had had before—more recognition too of the many possibilities open to a writer.

We've experimented, played, like this with all kinds of sentences and "non-sentences" from the classics to the subway ads; and the widening awareness of language in both students and teacher is a rewarding thing to be a part of. Often I have to point to the clock when our time is up, and this alone is reason to continue.

But there are other reasons. The retention is good. They remember these sentences and the problems involved longer than I do. Further, and more important, there is a definite integrating force at work here. First, there is a carry-over to the outside that causes the students to bring sentences in to you from the world. Second, there is a carry-over to their writing in that they are more familiar with and freer with the language. And because the real language is being dealt with all the time instead of being replaced by a synthetic one for language study, language, literature, and composition begin to mesh.

Now the old way of separating English into the study of grammar, the study of composition, the study of literature, did not succeed very well in developing a genuine appreciation for language or a real skill with it, and one of the reasons for the failure was, I think, this very separation. Those students who, liking English, went on to become English teachers did so because they loved literature and wanted so much to teach it that they were willing to put up with grammar and composition in order to do so. And the three continued separate.

The integrating force, the force that can bring the three elements together, was at work when my students heard, with delight, the Xingu sentence on the record. That was a discovery and a dramatic one. Others are more quiet.

Once a student has really seen, felt, and absorbed a sentence structure, he seems to have added it to his repertory. He has something he can use. And once he admires a sentence structure, he quite naturally tends to imitate it. He may not always do this in the best way or with the most suitable material, but he does have something to call on. He is, I think, on top of the sentence instead of underneath it.

This kind of carry-over is unconscious. It can be brought about consciously too. A sentence-by-sentence analysis of the first paragraph of Virginia Woolf's essay "How Should One Read a Book?" followed by a careful sentence-by-sentence imitation of the paragraph, followed next by free writing on a similar type of subject did produce marked improvement in the composition of students who were poor writers. That this marked

improvement is permanent I doubt; that the general level of writing competence of these students was raised I do not doubt. And I know that this was an easier, more effective, less harmful way of raising that competence than I have found before. It was less harmful because it just about did away with those inhibiting red marks we have always felt it incumbent on ourselves to put on a student's paper. It was easier and more effective partly for the same reason and partly because I had an expert assistant in Virginia Woolf.

Close familiarity with the elements of good writing plus more confidence in his basic grasp of language helps the student become a better writer. It can help him become a better reader too—especially when he encounters some difficulty in a passage.

There is a phrase in Frost's poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time" that always bothered me until one day, instead of sort of sliding over the whole thing as I usually do with parts of poems I can't understand, I looked at it instead as a language problem.

In that poem Frost writes of how he is out in his back yard chopping wood and getting pleasure and emotional release from the work. And the phrase that bothered me was "for the common good" in the following section.

Stanza 2, lines 5-8.

What I discovered when I looked carefully was that the phrase is misplaced, that it belongs with *spares*—The blows that a life of self-control spares for the common good, to strike—but that he couldn't place it there because it would throw off the rhyme if he did. So he took his poetic license and his chances and put it at the end.

The point is small. The technique is not. It can be used, and has been by linguists, on more difficult poems, more important questions. In short, it is a useful technique for both student and teacher when needed.

When needed—these are important words for English teachers today. Not so long ago we had no choice in our approach. We had only one grammar, Latin grammar, and it didn't fit English very well, without a lot of squeezing, pushing, twisting, and some imagining. If a student studied Latin and was adept with language, he could understand English grammar quite well—but he could never apply much of that understanding to writing or

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[2] From "Two Tramps in Mud Time" from Complete Poems of Robert Frost. Copyright 1936 by Robert Frost. Copyright © 1964 by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

reading. There wasn't much to apply.

But that was then. And now is different. So rather than complain about the complexities of the "new English" or the rapidity with which one grammar succeeds another in these days, why not try to utilize whatever we can of all this, when needed? We might eventually have a more integrated, more effective English. And we might also find ourselves with a new joy in all of our work.